

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 23, 2003

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Court Grants Request by State Parks

Agreement Protects Both Snowy Plover, And Public Access at Oceano Dunes

SACRAMENTO – California State Parks will preserve much of the existing multiple-use and beach camping opportunities at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, while also moving forward with more protections for nesting western snowy plovers, under the terms of a lawsuit settlement announced today.

The parties to the settlement agreement were California State Parks, Friends of Oceano Dunes, a multi-use group associated with the park, the California Off Road Vehicle Association, the Environmental Defense Center and the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Oceano Dunes State Vehicle Recreation Area is within the 15,000-acre Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex, south of San Luis Obispo. The 3500-acre park contains 1,500 acres of mostly bare sand for vehicle access beach camping and off-highway vehicle riding areas.

The settlement agreement was signed last year, but the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club delayed its implementation. State Parks eventually asked the court to intervene, and U.S. District Court Judge George H. King ordered that the settlement agreement be honored in its original form. The settlement requires the Sierra Club to drop its original lawsuit challenging off-roading and beach camping at Oceano Dunes.

“We are extremely pleased that we can continue to offer beach camping and off-roading at the only place in the California State Park System with such opportunities,” said Tony Perez, chief of the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division of California State Parks. “This agreement also allows us to continue our aggressive and successful efforts on behalf of the western snowy plover at Oceano Dunes.”

Under the settlement agreement, two miles of beach will remain open to camping and riding at Oceano Dunes. About a half-mile of beach area will be closed to the public, during the March to October breeding season, to protect western snowy plovers, the tiny shorebird listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In order to protect current breeders, the change will be effective for the 2003 breeding season.

“This agreement once again demonstrates that all park visitors, including off roaders, are doing their part to protect sensitive habitats,” said Jim Suty, Friends of Oceano Dunes’ President. “We compliment the Sierra Club for their recognition of the need to balance multi-use recreation with endangered species protection as confirmed in this agreement.”

The Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club filed the original lawsuit against State Parks, claiming the popular Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area was in violation of the U.S. Endangered Species Act by allowing vehicle beach camping and off-highway vehicle access in the area. Under the terms of the settlement, State Parks will step up its existing protection measures for threatened species, but keep the park open to multi-use recreation and camping.

The settlement agreement includes a number of steps to be taken by State Parks. Chief among these is moving the camping area at Oceano Dunes back up the beach one-half mile, from Milepost 7 to Milepost 6 during breeding season. Other elements of the agreement call for State Parks to:

- Examine alternatives to vehicle crossings of Arroyo Grande Creek where possible. Currently, vehicles entering the park must cross the narrow creek near where it meets the ocean.
- Provide funding for a number of environmental projects outside the park in support of Plover recovery efforts throughout the State.
- Pay for a federal western snowy plover recovery manager, and establish a working group to monitor funding for plover recovery.

Oceano Dunes SVRA is located on the central coast of California in San Luis Obispo County near Pismo Beach, and hosts more than 1 million visitors annually. Oceano Dunes currently earmarks about one-third of its annual budget for the protection of wildlife and related habitats.

California State Parks has initiated extensive protective efforts for the western snowy plover at Oceano Dunes, as well as elsewhere along the California coast. About 25 percent of California’s 1,100-mile coastline is under the jurisdiction of California State Parks.

Scientists with California State Parks said nesting western snowy plovers have shown significant progress in chick survival following the department’s efforts at predator management. After instituting the predator management program at Oceano Dunes last year, for instance, surveys showed that 36 of the 62 western snowy plover chicks that hatched reached fledgling age, meaning the age at which they are capable of flying. The year before just two western snowy plover chicks survived out of 71 hatched.

The western snowy plover is a sparrow-sized, pale-colored shorebird that breeds along the Pacific Coast from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. The coastal population of the bird is listed by the federal government as threatened due to a serious decline in breeding numbers, mainly as a result of loss of suitable habitat due to development, predators, expansion of non native beach grass, unleashed dogs and disturbance by humans.